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THE NEW COMMUNICATION AND
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES AND THE
AFRICAN CULTURAL RENAISSANCE



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As we approach the twenty-first century, speculations abound as to "what" century it would be. Phrases such as the "information age", "information explosion" and the "information society" have emerged at the tail end of the twentieth century, suggesting by their content, the character of the century that lurks ahead. Advances in research and development in microelectronics have created important areas such as informatics and telematics and fields related to computer science and computer technology. These advances have given birth to what we are generally now referring to as the new communication and information technologies. Research on software development in particular has resulted in the possibility of miniaturizing knowledge without the loss of content and substance. Miniaturized knowledge is rapidly disseminated by means of computer and related technologies with a wider scope than the traditional methods, and with the possibility of reaching more people simultaneously.

Furthermore, the advances mentioned above create more entry points to the national, regional and global knowledge systems. At the heart of all of these developments is the emergence of a "new culture" coming into being as part of the massive impact of the new communication and information technologies. At the same time, valued elements of the "old" culture, particularly in nations of the South are in need of aggregation and dissemination, as the new culture asserts itself and finds its way into other cultural realms, shaking their foundations, resulting in distortions that could conceivably disrupt development efforts. The above need not be the case.

The purpose of this paper is to address some of the key issues that need to be considered when we discuss the impact of the new communication and information technologies on culture. I shall restrict my discussion of the topics to African states in general, not singling out any particular state for analysis. This is done recognizing, of course, that all African nations are not at the same level of communication and information infrastructural development on the one hand, and also having different attitudes towards cultural regeneration and dissemination. The basic reasons for discussing the issue in general terms are: (1) as a continent, Africa is struggling to get a handle on the complex role and position of culture in its efforts to forge ahead with its various development programmes, and (2) Africa should be concerned with its position in the global revolution taking place in the new information and communication technologies.

The perspective I have on the impact of the new communication and information technologies on culture, particularly the case of Africa, is positive and constructive. I do not fear the advances in the technologies mentioned above, but rather welcome them in order to put them in the service of African efforts to develop the continent. The impact on culture is seen as good, leading to serious research by Africans at home and abroad, on the mastering and application of the new communication and information technologies. I recognize from the start that access to the relevant data on the new technologies is extremely difficult. Ownership and control over these technologies are mainly based in the West and Japan. I will discuss the topic, therefore, with a focus on the following: (1) access, (2) aggregation and documentation of cultural artifacts and (3) channelling that which has been aggregated.

The Issue of Access

The 1980s will be remembered for several significant debates among which was the famous New World Information and Communication order articulated by UNESCO under the leadership of Amadou M. M'bow of Senegal.¹ He and his fellow proponents were concerned with the balance of information generation and distribution, coupled with the idea of "control", to an extent, of information and information/communication apparatus in the so-called third world. As is well-known, the West, under the leadership of the United States opposed Mr. M'bow and pulled their resources together resulting in the withdrawal of the United States, Britain and Singapore from UNESCO. The above led to the defeat of the movement and of M'bow in his efforts to win reappointment as Director-General of UNESCO. I start my discussion with the above because it points out the importance of power -- possessing or lacking it, when it comes to the information and communication sectors. The non-west faced a battle and lost on a subject over which they have no power or control.

With the atmosphere of defeat still prevalent, to what extent could Africans gain access to the needed new information technologies in order to put them into effective use, thus preserving and disseminating essential elements among which would be African culture? For those who may ask why bother with the aggregation and dissemination of culture as content, the answer is self-evident. Western man, no matter where he is, has managed to hold on tightly to the fundamental pillars of his culture -- value-orientations; religion; economic and political ideologies. Furthermore, he has developed and used various information and communication technologies to document, store, disseminate and retrieve data. In essence, western man is undoubtedly the one at least for now, who possesses

the power of dissemination utilizing the most sophisticated information technologies. In some sectors, entrepreneurs and government officials actually try to limit access to data and technology in the areas of concern -- information and communication technologies.²

Access could also be viewed from a complex web of perspectives. In the first instance the question could be asked, access by whom? This question raises the issue of planning. African states do not collectively plan and develop strategies to participate in the information technology revolution and advances occurring in the global system. Their participation is at most ceremonial. They are spectators who visit fairs and decide to "purchase" some merchandise that impresses them or items out of which they could make personal profits by reselling or leasing them.³ No conscious efforts are discernible whereby the collectivity gets involved in pulling resources together not only for purchasing but learning about the technologies to a point that they could replicate and modify them thus reducing their dependence on external sources. This inability or perhaps refusal to plan collectively is the single most important obstacle to access.

There are, of course, some African states that manifest interest in the information and communication technologies. Unfortunately, however, they are all involved as users and not creators or manufacturers.⁴ The argument being fostered here is that a conscious planning effort has to be made by Africans to organize strategies and means of accessing information and other relevant data on the new communication technologies not only to apply towards the aggregation of cultural artifacts and their subsequent dissemination, but also to create capacities for data collection, documentation, exchange of information across

sectors, institutions and regional bodies. The issue of access, therefore, is treated partly as one that deals with both hard and software. The argument further calls for responsible policy development on the new communication and information technologies that would commit African governments to procure resources required for this sector, and develop guidelines for planning and eventual implementation.

We should recognize, at this point that even though we may be in a position to develop pertinent policies, there are other factors that need to be considered such as the legal implications, privatization drives by the principal generators and owners of data; intellectual property rights, and international regulations on the subject. The strategists for access would have to take into account the multi-faceted dimension of the issues surrounding the new information and communication technologies.

In addition to the above, access should not be limited of those in power alone -- government, corporations, etc. in Africa. The young generation need access. The young would need access particularly for expanding their fund of knowledge in the areas of the new technologies -- informatics, telematics etc., and also in the areas of cultural heritage and scenario construction for the twenty-first century. We could not afford to develop scenarios without a firm cultural context. In short, cultural heritage is a significant variable in social engineering, especially as we prepare for the next century.

Aggregation

I began the discussion with the issue of access because it is directly based on the existence or non-existence of policy guidelines. Thus, for us to talk about aggregation without understanding the context of access is futile. Since a call has been made for the formulation of pertinent policy to deal with

access to the new information and communication technologies, we could begin to speculate on aggregation, a central factor particularly in the area of cultural heritage. I have argued elsewhere that Africans should consider the importance of intergenerational equity, and should, therefore, take a position that the present generation is responsible to pass on to the future generations essential elements of its cultural heritage.⁵ It is precisely on the basis of the above claim that this aggregation aspect is examined.

The term "aggregation" is used here in its simplest meaning -- putting together; packaging. It is my belief that against the background of some declared intention to get involved in the new communication technologies, Africans have a unique opportunity to capture on video-tapes, audio-cassettes (these are not new technologies as such but very useful in the African context), computer diskettes, etc., the essential elements of our heritage not only to pass on to future generations but also to use as instructional materials in our present pedagogical efforts. No concrete, discernible, and serious mechanisms exist presently to handle the aggregation of whatever is left of our heritage. We use the new information and communication technologies to view content unrelated to our culture for educational and entertainment purposes. The great stories of the continent are not captured on video or audio tapes, video discs and other such forms as cultural packages that are widely disseminated in the continent and in diaspora. Sporadic productions are made with commercial and profit motives serving as catalysts. This is why it is essential to link aggregation to policy formulation on access. The more conscious the planning, based on solid policy guidelines, the more effective would be our collective aggregation efforts.

In the cultural realm, time is not on our side to get hold of our old citizens to serve as sources for aggregation of our cultural content. Ours is largely an oral tradition, depending to a large extent on people who are living archives. Our archival tradition is, therefore, linked to the life span of certain individuals in society who know about our cultural heritage.⁶ This is particularly true for Africa as a continent and to some extent, for those in diaspora.

In addition to the above, Africans have to take research endeavours more seriously in the areas of communication, information science, ethnography, anthropology and sociology. Presently, several of us represent and attend to the research interests of Europe and America, the international organizations and foundations that have the stature of multi-national corporations. As a result, we have associated "money" (forex as it is called in the African continent) so closely with research, that we are hesitant without it, to reach into a fantastic fund of data upon which research could be conducted and from which results could be derived for effective packaging and eventual dissemination. Africa has so much for Africans to study that all of us (professionals) put together could not exhaust the multifarious issues that could contribute to the enhancement of knowledge about ourselves and consequently assist in the amelioration of the vexing conditions prevailing in Africa today.

The new communication and information technologies could be the very tools that would facilitate our aggregation efforts and more importantly, serve as the means of disseminating much needed knowledge on Africa's past, present and prospects for the future as articulated by Africans. Needless to say, the task is not easy. All of what is being argued here depends entirely on the conscious

decisions of those in power in Africa to divert their attention to the potentials of the new communication and information technologies and to provide the necessary resources required for their application within the overall context of a continent in a process of restructuring itself and engaging its human resources in a joint venture to plan for the future. Nothing less would be meaningful or worthwhile.

Channelling

The factor that stands as a rubric for this section is one that defies logic in African communication policies. Channelling ranges from radio in its crudest form to the latest computers in the market. Several African states simply cannot even reach the majority of their citizens through the most common medium in our time -- the radio. All African states boast of having radio stations but could not boast about who they reach. It is difficult to boast when one examines the status of the basic infrastructural factors such as energy and power, telecommunications, road networks, etc. With regard to radio, the major audiences remain largely urban. Besides the technical aspects, programming raises a lot of questions about the extent to which African governments consider seriously, the tasks involved in nation-building.

Yet, to look at the various organizations with mandates to deal with telecommunications and media communications, one is left with a sad feeling. The goals of the organizations are lofty, but the resources are simply unavailable to enable them to carry out the tenets of their mandate. The Pan-African News Agency (PANA) is a classic case of the malaise mentioned above. There are others that we cannot present at this time but which also require close scrutiny, such as URTNA, and PADIS.

We can no longer dichotomise the print and electronic media, since the modern print media depend heavily on telecommunications apparatus and electronic based technologies such as satellites and computers in order to produce newspapers and other channels usually associated with the print media. It is incumbent on African leaders, therefore, to take a position supported by required resources, on the imperative of having an integrated approach to media development and a clear-cut policy on computer-based technologies. We can no longer afford to be reckless spectators and consumers of foreign media content and software where a lot of content exist in our midst and are begging to be recognized and treated accordingly, and where potential abounds for software development.

Restricting our topic to media, some of the fundamental media technologies we could consider range from rural radio stations with generation of local programming content to community antenna television (CATV) that would stretch the audience reach and increase concomitantly, audience involvement in development endeavours. The two examples mentioned above are basic. In order for African states to realize any degree of success in enhancing media capacity, they would have to commit themselves also to improving telecommunications facilities particularly in the area of satellite ownership and the actual use of this technology. The argument here is not just for the acquisition of satellites as showpieces (reminiscent of the setting up of TV stations) but the provision of the means required to make a satellite link useful. Such links would directly impact positively on the setting up of computers to facilitate documentation and dissemination rapidly on issues of education, health, agriculture and others.

The advances in communication and information technologies have made it automatically necessary to adopt these new developments in any plan developed for media infrastructural strengthening and operation. Thus, informatics and telematics would have to be incorporated in practically all sectors in society in efforts to move data around, refine data, disseminate and store data as necessary. Again, the picture one gets is the unavoidable interlinkages that have resulted as these new technologies emerge.

Stemming from the above, the implications for channelling aggregated content on cultural heritage are obvious -- enhanced channel capacities would provide the means of reaching well targeted audiences with content that would be repeatedly transmitted, adjusted, and evaluated for impact. It is precisely because of such a potential that I postulated at the beginning of this paper, that the impact of the new communication and information technologies need not be regarded as negative. On the contrary, the positive use of these technologies based, of course, on our creative generation of content (aggregation) could assist tremendously in confidence building and recognition of the absolute need for self-reliance. Furthermore, the positive applications could help bring into a sharp and ordered form, a cultural context which is presently in disarray. Through such a process, Africans at home can link more meaningfully with their kin in diaspora and provide for them a cultural warrant which is not self-evident at present, and which would substantiate their pronouncements on their African cultural heritage.⁷ The new technologies could, as least, assist in an important effort on the part of Africans in diaspora to reconstitute their heritage based on firm, and visible content.

In conclusion, I have attempted to introduce the idea that the new communication and information technologies could have very positive impact on the cultural renaissance of Africa and its children everywhere. This position is articulated on the premise that sound cultural basis form the foundation for confidence building and self-reliance. This is not to say that culture is the single most important factor. It is the one of the most important factors to pay attention to in our efforts of rebuilding our societies. There is no need to argue forcefully that African culture is currently in crisis and under stress. What we need to debate now is how advances in science and technology particularly the new information and communication technologies could positively be put in our service. In attempting to discuss the above, I chose to examine the factors of access, aggregation and channelling, as crucial elements in our efforts.

Footnotes

1. See for example, MacBride, Sean, et. al., Many Voices One World, UNESCO, 1980; and D.A. Mankekar, "Synthesis of Third World Viewpoints, " in Ullamaija, Kivikuru and Tapio Varis (eds) Approaches to International Communication, Helsinki: Finish National Commission for UNESCO, 1986, pp. 29-36.
2. Ploman, E.W., "Privatization of Information," (unpublished paper), Tokyo: Global Learning Division, The United Nations University, (1986) This problem is covered also in the debate on Transborder Data Flow
3. This is a persistent problem identified during missions I undertook to several nations in the continent, with the purpose of examining the "state of the art" on the new information and communication technologies in Africa. (1985-1988).
4. Ibid.
5. Blake, Cecil, "Communication Development in Africa and its Impact on Cultural Synchronization of Africa and its People", Africa Media Review, vol.2, #2, 1986. pp. 29-45.
6. The United Nations University attempted to implement a project titled: Archives of Traditional Knowledge. The project was never completed. UNESCO had an activity in this area also.
7. The re-emergence of the African consciousness movement in the United States serves as the basis for this statement. Afro-Americans are now being referred to as "African-Americans". There is also an epistemological movement -- Afrocentricity which is being discussed at Seminars in major institutions in the United States such as Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Howard University, Washington, DC.